



Iowa Children's Justice

February, 2011
Family Treatment Courts

Iowa's FTCs

In September 2007, the Judicial Branch of Iowa, the Iowa Department of Human Services, the Iowa Department of Public Health, and the Office of Drug Control Policy received a five year federal grant to fund three new and expand two existing Family Treatment Courts. These FTCs are in Polk, Wapello, Linn, Scott and Woodbury, Cherokee and IDA County area. (The Woodbury and Cherokee sites now operate as separate FTC sites.) As part of the PACT grant each of these sites has received specialized training and support on working with families in the child welfare system, where substance use is a leading factor in their involvement. Additional training was offered on such issues as collaborative team building, developing family support and motivational interviewing. In addition, two FTCs not funded by the PACT grant have begun offering services in Fayette County and Buena Vista Counties.

What are Family Treatment Courts?

Parental substance abuse is a significant issue in many child abuse and neglect cases, by some estimates involved in as many as 70% of cases. One method to address these cases is Family Treatment Courts (FTCs). Based on the Drug Court model, FTCs are judge-led multidisciplinary teams of child welfare, substance abuse treatment and other professionals created to address these cases through a combination of joint case planning, frequent judicial review, team oversight and coordinated services and support. A local FTC may be known by the name created by the local team such as Family Drug Court, Family Recovery Court or Family Wellness Court.

Benefits of Family Treatment Courts

The goal of the FTC is to assist participants in their recovery while simultaneously assuring the safe and permanent placement for children. Built on team collaboration, coordinated services and support, and multidisciplinary training, the FTC offers participants a strength based supportive environment to promote family recovery and lasting change. As part of the FTC, participants are offered a variety of services and support, including prompt substance evaluation and treatment. Progress is also monitored by frequent court hearings, case staffing and drug testing. However, the Family Treatment Court is more than just increased services and supervision. In particular, the FTC approach recognizes the unique needs of recovering parents. All of the PACT teams include a family recovery worker, often someone in recovery themselves, who assists participants in establishing self-sufficiency in their day to day activities such as doctor's appointments, seeking employment, engaging in healthy family activity or support group attendance.

The PACT Model

The PACT sites have a FTC coordinator to assist local treatment teams with implementation of their courts, outreach, education and resource development. The coordinator may also assist in engaging the broader community in support of the FTC and their clients. In addition to assisting in the operation of the court at the local level, coordinators also share information between sites, and assist in data collection for the state wide evaluation. PACT Family Treatment Court Teams typically consist of the following members:

- The Judge
- The FTC Coordinator
- The County Attorney
- Attorneys – Parents' Attorneys and GALS
- The DHS Social Worker and Supervisor
- The Substance Abuse Treatment Provider
- The FSRP Provider
- The Family Recovery Worker
- Other Providers –i.e. Housing, Mental Health, Community Services

Given the complexities of child welfare case planning and the time limits of ASFA, a successful FTC must establish a court environment that provides a balance of support and accountability that allows participants to make timely progress. Each of the PACT sites is required to meet the following goals in their local site.

- The development of a multi-disciplinary collaborative team
- Frequent court hearings and ongoing judicial interaction with participants
- A non-adversarial, supportive approach including joint case planning and coordinated response to participant compliance
- A continuum of substance abuse and other services
- Intensive support from a family recovery worker
- Abstinence monitored by frequent drug testing
- Multidisciplinary training and partnership building
- Broader community understanding and support for the FTC
- Evaluation to gauge effectiveness and measure achievement

Research

The evaluator for the PACT grant is Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning (CJJP). The evaluation plan consists of measuring 15 indicators of the pilot sites and a matched comparison group. Some of the preliminary results include the following:

- 284 adults and 465 children have been served through the grant
 - 71% of children were able to remain in the custody of their parents or caregivers
 - 94% of children who were reunified parents did not re-enter placement
 - For those children who had a permanency goal other than reunification, 100% achieved that goal within 24 months
 - Since the beginning of this project, 39 babies have been born substance free.
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What Judges can do?

Even without forming FTC, local community judges can take steps to facilitate, monitor and support substance abuse treatment for parents.

- **Request a substance abuse evaluation:** If there is evidence of frequent drug or alcohol use or there is a suspicion of a substance abuse disorder, a substance abuse evaluation by a treatment agency can provide valuable information about the client's usage, willingness to change and treatment needs.
- **Schedule more frequent reviews:** If a client does not seem to be making progress in substance abuse treatment or in their case plan, scheduling more frequent hearings can assist in encouraging and monitoring treatment.
- **Inquire about a client's other behaviors:** An assessment of a client's actions, such as consistent employment, interaction with their children, and follow through with services is an effective way to measure progress. In most cases the first sign of a concern and a potential relapse is a negative change in a person's behavior.
- **Inquire about appropriate drug testing:** Drug testing can also be an effective tool in monitoring and supporting clients in recovery, but drug tests alone are not a gauge of a client's progress. Drug testing results should be considered in light of the client's other behaviors. Effective drug tests are random, monitored to protect against tampering, and results are quickly evaluated and addressed with clients.

For More Information

For More Info about Family Drug Treatment Courts, please Contact Doyle Evans at Children's Justice at Doyle.Evans@lowacourts.gov.

The National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (NCSACW) has developed the SAFERR (Screening and Assessment for Family Engagement, Retention, and Recovery) guidebook to help public and private agencies address families affected by substance use disorders. SAFERR provides a variety of screening and assessment tools and also guidance on building cross system collaboration and communication. The guidebook is available in PDF form at: <http://www.ncsacw.samhsa.gov/files/SAFERR.pdf>

The NCSACW also offers free online tutorials on the subjects of substance abuse and child welfare. Three tutorials, for child welfare professionals, substance abuse professionals, and legal professionals are available. CLEs and CEUs are available for successful completion of these tutorials. The tutorials can be found at: <http://www.ncsacw.samhsa.gov/training/default.aspx>

An article about judicial perspectives on Family Treatment Courts by Judge Leonard Edwards (Ret.) is available at: http://www.celebratingfamilies.net/PDF/Judge_Edwards_Ray_article.pdf
